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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the subject of fragments as they appear in the writing of college freshmen. It examines the conditions under which certain syntactic constructions are identified as fragments and the reasons for designating some of these fragments as nonpenalty and others as penalty types. The fragment is viewed here as a syntactic construction which demonstrates a deficiency in either a subject or a predicate element, a verb, or the use of a subordinator. Guidelines are presented for classifying the fragments into penalty and nonpenalty types for the purpose of teaching the student to avoid the penalty types of fragments. (RB)

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FRAGMENTS IN STANDARD ENGLISH

Nemia M. Chai

In brief, this paper amounts to what might be called ruminations on the subject of fragments--conditions under which we identify certain syntactic constructions as fragments and reasons for designating some of these fragments as non-penalty types and others as penalty types. While efforts here cannot be exactly characterized as being innovative, inspiring, or ambitious, hopefully they offer some guidelines in classifying fragments into non-penalty and penalty types, and ultimately, especially for the student, in avoiding the penalty types.

We shall understand the term "fragment" here to refer to a syntactic construction which demonstrates deficiency in one or a combination of the following ways:

(1) It lacks either a subject or a predicate element; this deficiency may be illustrated in actual student-made constructions as Truly a never-ending battle between husband and wife., Not in their education perhaps but on their different approaches to life., and And politely asks his friend for the prized possessions he gave him.

(2) Its verb is in its non-finite form; some examples

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which demonstrate this deficiency may be Long, delicate fingers topped by nails rounded and smooth., The second being a much better way to put it., and The difference being when and to whom this courtesy should be extended.

(3) It is introduced by a subordinator; examples which illustrate this deficiency are dependent clauses, such as Especially when a middle-aged couple, a young lady, and an older lady are involved., Whereas the dictionary gives just the three definitions., and Simply because of its relaxed, unhurried mood, sentence clarity, the non-worry attitude of correct usage and its simple terms and phrases.

We shall also use the level of usage called "standard English" here in the context of Freshman English to refer to the written form of the language, much in the tradition in which sentences are strings which contain subject-predicate elements and demonstrate independent clause structures. In this context, "Deliberate fragmentations of the broken sentence type have only a special and limited use, and are not recommended for normal prose composition."[1] By this characterization, strings which are identified as "comma splices," run-on sentences," and "fragments" constitute penalty points.

The case may well be that for some instructors of Freshman English evidence of fragments in their students' writing is too negligible to deserve attention. But for many of us who must cope with the booming egalitarian admissions policy,

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[1]Donald Davidson, Concise American Composition and Rhetoric (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 123.

such evidence demands concern. Here are a few real examples of students' writing from last winter quarter's vintage:

Assigned to compose a paragraph on what he thought an educated man was, a student began:[2]

> The advantages of having an education today. The way society is set up without an education you might as well be dead. Because you look for a job without education nine times out of ten you will be turned down. . . .

In another instance, a student, writing on what his thoughts of a lady were, stated:

> For years people have been saying that she a lady, but I don't know if there is search a person. What a lady to me mean. . . .

In still another instance, a student who was asked to develop an essay on her thoughts of a gentleman wrote:

> Some of his unique and polite traits that make me feel like a queen; is him always holding the door for any lady existing; his tilting his hat, and him pulling out a chair which you want to set. . . .

As regards the topics, we might conjecture that the student who attempted to write on an educated man found it difficult to specify concrete details with which to make his description meaningful; we might also assume that the students who wrote their thoughts down on a lady and a gentleman supposed that, like the American bison, there are not many ladies and gentlemen left, or, worse yet, that they are no longer living specimens in our midst these days; thus the label "ladies and gentlemen" survives today only among our patent

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[2]In these excerpted examples and similar others which follow the fragments are underlined. Later in this paper a fragment is double-underlined when it is revised in such a way that it is either given an independent clause structure or made a part of an independent clause.

salutations and on doors of private lounges otherwise also designated as "hers" and "his." Our focus here, however, is on neither of these connotative guesses.

Rather, our assumption is of a more explicit, basic sort: that structurally well-formed sentences contribute to the overall effectiveness of an essay, and that the use of unintentional fragments, such as those illustrations above which are far from being aesthetic, detracts from the overall rhetorical effectiveness of that essay. A question which we may consider now is: how significantly sentence rhetoric figures in the evaluation of an essay.

Setting aside blatantly impressionistic grading systems, we find that an essay may be graded on different aspects and that aspects of an essay may be given different values. For an example, in the grading criterion employed in the Regents' Testing Program in the University System of Georgia, an essay consists of three main aspects: organization constitutes 40% (sub-aspects are: narrowing the subject; evidence of a thesis; and development of the thesis, broken down into unity, logical development, coherence, and evidence);rhetoric constitutes 40% (sub-aspects and their respective divisions are: diction--clarity, economy, precision, and consistency; sentence structure--clarity, variety, and parallelism; paragraph--unity, logical development, and coherence; and point of view--appropriateness and consistency); and mechanics constitutes 20% (sub-aspects are: spelling, punctuation, usage, and vocabulary).

A grading system such as this one in the Regents' Testing Program in the University System of Georgia may be said to typify a situation in which the grading is diagnostic and speedy; according to this criterion, the aspect of sentence structure constitutes 10% of the overall grade of a given essay. Governed by this criterion, the instructor simply reads through an essay and renders it a score without writing on the essay any suggested correction of errors therein.

It may just be appropriate to mention at this point that I am familiar with the "whollistic" grading system as explained above, having served as chairman of the Columbus College Committee on the Regents' Testing Program in the past two years, and having participated in several essay-grading sessions in the Program.

Another grading criterion, one which has led to these ruminations here, has been used in the English Department at Columbus College in the last three or four years. According to this grading system, an essay has five main aspects, each aspect constituting 5 points in a total score of 25 points. These aspects are: organization, content, sentence variety and clarity, diction, and mechanics. Further, in this system, each instance of comma splice, run-on sentence, or fragment constitutes a penalty point, and each point is deducted from the total numerical score of the essay. Below is a sample of the scoring grid and assignment of numerical-letter grade equivalences:

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Organization						
Content						
Sentence Variety and Clarity						
Diction						
Mechanics						
25-22 A 21-18 B 17-13 C 12-8 D 7-1 F	Total					
	Minus					
	GRADE					

An essay-grading system such as this one at Columbus College may be said to represent an instructional, rather than diagnostic, system; it is undoubtedly an attempt at an explicit evaluation with which an instructor-grader may explain to his student the distribution of points on the five aspects of his essay, as well as the penalty deductions. It should be obvious that, in using this instructional device, the instructor customarily writes suggested correction of errors directly on the essay itself. Because it candidly assigns sentence structure potentially over 20% of the overall grade, this system behooves both the instructor and his student to recognize the serious nature of sentence-making in the writing and grading of essays. Specifically, now, the need becomes crucial for the instructor to clarify to his student the fact that not all fragments are necessarily penalty types. It seems particularly more crucial that the instructor does so, for nowhere in this grading system are specified those syntactic constructions which are identified as fragments, or those conditions under which fragments may or many not be considered penalty types.

We will now attempt to list fragment-type constructions, on the basis of samples culled from students' essays and

selected sources:

A. One-word exclamations:

Golly!

Man!

Sh-h-h--

B. Phrasal exclamations--examples under this set are remainders of fully formed sentences after deletion of certain partials:

She (is) a pretty chick?

What a helluva place (this is)!

C. Proverbial or idiomatic utterances which do not satisfy subject-predicate requirements but are not considered sentence partials:

Like father, like son.[3]

Down with tyrants![4]

The more explicit the instructor's instructions, the better chances the student has in writing the essay.

D. Interrupted utterances:

That's just--

Anybody there in--

E. Constructions beginning with conjunctions and, but, or, and yet; these are considered fragments from a strictly conservative view of grammar:

Agatha and Tim then saw to it that they were not to see each other again. And that's how the story went.

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3 and 4 Professor John Algeo of University of Georgia offered me these examples during our correspondence on the present subject in the summer of 1974.

That the oil crisis may well be a maneuver by big oil business cannot be denied. But can you prove it?

It's a good suggestion that you buy beer now before it's too late. Or ask Steve if he'd do it for you.

Mr. Smut knew that his aging wife loved him. Yet he also knew how very jealous she could be.

F. Constructions beginning with the conjunction for; in conventional grammar for is grouped under the label of "coordinate conjunctions," along with and, but, or, and yet. However, linguistic competence of some speakers seems to confirm that samples below are fragments and therefore need to be grouped separately from samples under E above. This sort of response may suggest that in current usage for is on its ways to becoming a subordinator:

With language being arbitrary, one wonders why some words are said and spelled the way they are. For many times the word doesn't seem to represent what is being talked about.

Even though the written and the spoken language are very different, they both go hand in hand with each other. For if you never recorded what you said it would all be forgotten.

G. Constructions containing verbs in their non-finite forms:

Instead of saying "he died," we should say "he passed away." The second being a much better way to put it.

The difference being when and to whom this courtesy should be extended.

Long, delicate fingers topped by nails rounded and smooth.

Promising the moon, knowing that they cannot deliver even a small part of their claims.

H. Constructions beginning with transitional expressions to indicate illustration:

It has a deep sense of emotion which the reader can get involved in. Unlike the third paragraph which makes the reader feel bored.

When speaking, one may feel the movement in his throat. Like with saying the word "think."

Euphemisms are used to replace harsh or blunt expressions. Such as a young lady walking up to a man in a store and asking for the ladies' room.

I. Constructions which are deficient in subject-predicate requirements:

His business is dying, so he might as well go along with it /suicide/. With three kids who care nothing about him and a wife who married him for his money to begin with.

John, because the incident with the girl was a reminder of his wife's ever-present jealous, domineering nature, and Mrs. Doe, because the girl reminded her of youth.

Perhaps with an inborn quality of grace combined with sense and strength that made this lady a "Lady."

J. Constructions introduced by subordinators--these are primarily dependent clauses:

So, you can see why this letter can be classified as informal. Because of its relaxed, unhurried mood, sentence clarity, the non-worry attitude of correct usage and its use of simple terms and phrases.

The encyclopaedia gives you a more definite answer in this word. Whereas the dictionary gives you just the three definitions.

The bus seat situation is very comical. Especially when a middle-aged couple, a young lady, and an older lady are involved.

Conditions may vary in the classification of the above-listed fragment-type constructions into non-penalty and penalty types. Here, the following conditions may be suggested:

Condition (a): All these fragment-type constructions may be considered non-penalty types when they are used in the context of direct discourse; the term "direct discourse" is used here to refer to excerpted dialogue, monologue, letter, or any material which the writer borrows for purposes of illustration or evidence.

Condition (b): Fragment-type constructions under Sets F, G, H, I, and J may be considered penalty types when they are intentionally used outside the context of direct discourse as explained in Condition (a). At this point, the instructor should explain the thorny problem of double standards as this student seeks a writing model which satisfies the standards in a Freshman English class, particularly those which govern the use of fragments.[5]

Condition (c): Fragment-type constructions under Sets A, B, C, D, and E may be considered non-penalty types even when they are used intentionally outside the context of direct discourse. This is somewhat tantamount to allowing the student the use of these constructions for rhetorical effect.

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[5]For example, a sportswriter in Time (March 24, 1975) gets by in the following excerpt, whereas a Freshman English student can't: "To handicap a horse race simply by picking a jockey, regardless of his mount, the trainer or the opposition, is usually considered a form of gambling insanity. Not so last week at New York's Aqueduct race track" /Italics mine/.

In explaining especially the penalty-type constructions, hopefully the instructor grasps the essentials of a structural concept of sentence-making, in contrast to notional paraphrase. In this way, he may be able to demonstrate to his student relevant features of patterning, as well as perhaps some application of transformation, in helping the student revise a fragment into a fully formed sentence. It would be well, for example, to suggest minimal repair at this point of the lesson, rather than major sentential overhaul for the purpose of simultaneously achieving elegance.

Below are suggestions for minimal revision of penalty-type constructions as stipulated under Condition (b) above:

In Set F, the instructor may simply ask the student to join the two constructions in each example, hence the following revisions:

> With language being arbitrary, one wonders why some words are said and spelled the way they are, for many times the word doesn't seem to represent what is being talked about.
>
> Even though the written and the spoken (forms) language are very different, they both go hand in hand with each other, for if you never recorded what you said it would all be forgotten.

In Set G, the first two fragments contain being, a non-finite form of to be; in both instances the finite form is is appropriate, thus:

> Instead of saying "he died," we should say "he passed away." The second is a much better way to put it.
>
> The difference is when and to whom this courtesy should be extended.

The third example may be shown as deriving from the fully formed passive-voice construction,

> Long, delicate fingers are topped by nails rounded and smooth.

It may be said to derive, in turn, from its active-voice form, "Nails rounded and smooth top long, delicate fingers." The use of a comma to produce "nails, rounded and smooth" may give the sentence a final touch.

The fourth example likewise contains two non-finite verbs, promising and knowing; the former may be given a subject and used in its finite form, as in the following:

> They promise the moon, knowing that they cannot deliver even a small part of their claims.

In Set H, the first example may again be attached to the preceding construction by a comma:

> It has a deep sense of emotion which the reader can get involved in, unlike the third paragraph which makes the reader feel bored.

Recommending that the third example be revised by joining the two constructions with a comma and by replacing like with with as in, the instructor would show the student the following:

> When speaking, one may feel the movement in his throat, as in saying the word "think."

In the fourth example, the instructor may also suggest that the two constructions be joined by a comma and that certain words be rearranged or added for logical effect, as in:

> Euphemisms are used to replace harsh or blunt expressions, such as "ladies' room," instead of "toilet," when a young lady walks up to a man and asks for the place in a store.

In Set I, in which constructions are deficient in subject-predicate requirements, the fragment-types may be provided a main clause; hence:

> His business is dying, so he might as well go along with it /suicide/. With three kids who care nothing about him and a wife who married him for his money to begin with, what else can he do?
>
> The cartoon shows two interesting characters: John, because the incident with the girl was a reminder of his wife's ever-present jealous, domineering nature, and Mrs. Doe, because the girl reminded her of her youth.
>
> Perhaps it is an inborn quality of grace combined with sense and strength that made this lady a "Lady."

In Set J, in which constructions are introduced by subordinators, the instructor may suggest the use of a dash or a colon to join the two constructions in the first example, thus:

> So, you can see why this letter can be classified as informal: because of its relaxed, unhurried mood, sentence clarity, the non-worry attitude of correct usage and its use of simple terms and phrases.

As for the second and third examples, the instructor may simply ask the student to join the two constructions by a comma:

> The encyclopaedia gives you a more definite answer in this word, whereas the dictionary gives you just the three definitions.

The bus seat situation is very comical, especially when a middle-aged couple, a young lady, and an older lady are involved.

Moreover, able to explain features of sentence-making in terms of structure even beyond the problem of fragments, an instructor may assist a student who writes:

He has on a high-collared shirt with a pony-tail down his back.

He may show the student that this sentence contains two "shorter" sentences:

He has on a high-collared shirt.

and A high-collared shirt is with a pony-tail down his back.

That the "thought" is vague in the original sentence is obviously due to the structurally defective combination of the two source sentences. The instructor may then suggest the following two sentences instead:

He has on a high-collared shirt.

and He has on a pony-tail down his back.

And therefore the combination:

He has on a high-collared shirt and a pony-tail down his back.

Incidentally, he may suggest further that "wears" would be a suitable replacement for "has on."

To return to our ruminations on the subject of fragments, perhaps one recommendation deserves to be endorsed strongly: that is, the instructor needs to demonstrate, by means of models, that fragments can be avoided easily enough through minimal revision. This means that revising a fragment so that it is either given an independent clause structure or

made a part of an independent clause gains precedence over major sentential revision for purpose of simultaneously improving diction and achieving syntactic elegance.

It seems needless to claim that fragments can be easily culled from students' writing. Yet, paradoxically enough, we can all admit, with varying degrees of candidness, that we have considered fragments simply "incidental," or that they are so obvious mistakes that anyone should have long mastered the means of avoiding them. Perhaps it would be well for some of us who have a grading system, such as that at Columbus College, to sharpen the criterion and be consistent with it, as with the benefit of our ruminations here, rather than abandon the entire grading system. After all, our students are honestly anxious to become better students--if only we could give them explicit and consistent instructions!